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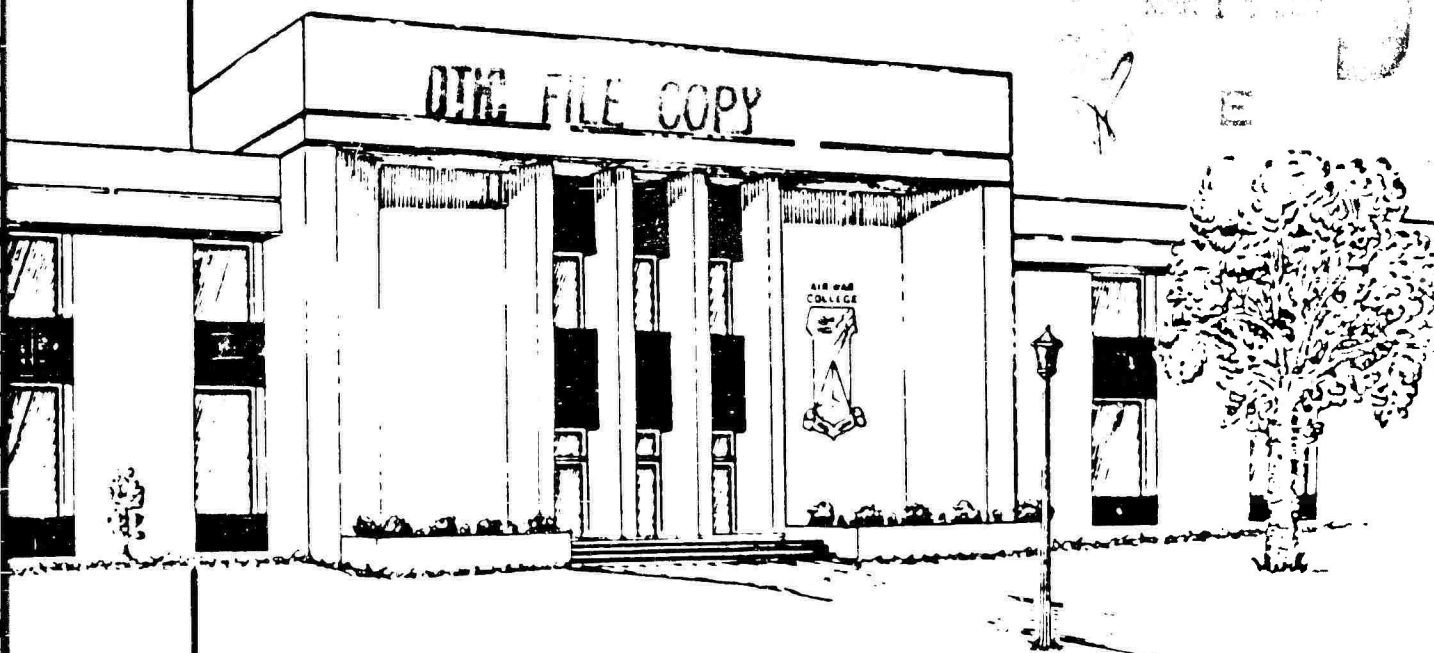
RESEARCH REPORT

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COVERT ACTION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF NATIONAL POLICY

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by

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A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED IN TO THE FACULTY

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FULLMENT OF THE RESEARCH

REQUIREMENT

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Air War College Research Department Abstract

Title: Covert Action as a Tool of National Policy.

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The relationship of covert action to national security policy is described as one of the many elements of power used in generating national security and foreign policy. Covert action is defined and the legal basis for US covert action is described. The planning of covert action and the conditions necessary for the successful execution of covert action are discussed and applied to several examples of covert action. The failure modes for covert action are also discussed.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Bruce T. Morland, Jr. (M.S., Texas A & M University, B.S. University of Texas at Arlington) is an aerospace engineer with several years industrial and academic experience as a senior engineer responsible for aircraft, torpedo, surface effects ship, and submersible design as well as basic research. He has been an intelligence officer with the Central Intelligence Agency since 1975 where he has been involved with the production of finished intelligence for policy makers. His interest in covert action is a natural outgrowth of his interest in the relationship between national policy and intelligence.

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CHAPTER I

NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY, NATIONAL OBJECTIVES, AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE ELEMENTS OF POWER

Covert action is one of the elements of power used to formulate and execute foreign policy and more specifically national security policy. National security policy is an outgrowth of many interrelated factors, expressions of national purpose, national interest, and national strategy to produce national security policy. The usual elements of power used to formulate policy are political, economic, psychosocial, military, scientific and technical, geographic, and covert action. This is a flexible, interactive process where changes in any element in the process such as economic power or interest or domestic policy interact to change either national security policy, national objectives, or any other discrete element in the process. In discussing covert action, I will use Hayne's definitions of survival, vital, major, and peripheral interests. He defines survival interests as the very existence of a country being in jeopardy as a result of an overt military attack or threat of attack resulting from an ultimatum; vital interests as those

likely to do serious harm unless strong measures including the use of conventional military force are taken; major interests as those that may adversely affect a country's political, economic, and social well-being; and peripheral interests as where a country's well-being is not adversely affected but where private companies operating in the area may be harmed.¹

In broad terms, basic US interests are the defense of the homeland, US economic well-being, favorable world order, and the promotion of US values. The elements of power vary in support of each interest. For example, defense of the homeland is usually defined in narrow terms--the defense of North America and the strategic balance between the US and the Soviet Union.²

The United States is a major economic power in almost all areas of the world. The US seeks to obtain new markets for US manufactured items and raw materials for US industries. The US is concerned about the effects of foreign competition on the American standard of living and the ability of American firms to trade and invest overseas due to foreign government restrictions. Domestic as well as foreign policy affect this interest area because of factors such as the value of US and foreign currencies, restrictive foreign laws, cheap foreign labor, and unfair trade practices, such as the

exclusion of US products on a foreign market and the dumping on the US market of foreign goods at less than their manufacturing price.²

Basically, favorable world order allows the US and its commercial firms to operate with as few hinderances as possible. Basic interests in the area include US alliances, alliances in which the US has an interest, US security assistance agreements, local conflicts, Soviet supported insurgencies, terrorism, and world population growth.²

Americans, in general, believe that American values such as constitutional government, individual rights and freedoms, the establishment of a system of law where the individual is presumed innocent until proved guilty, and a sense of social justice should be promoted abroad. Of the four basic national interest areas, this one has been pursued the most unevenly over the years and has probably been the one that has caused the US government the most trouble in international relations. The challenge for the US is to insure that evolving governmental and social systems are as compatible with our values and interests as possible.²

Covert action is an appropriate element of power to support all four of the basic national objectives; however, it has been used most often to support the objectives of favorable world order and the promotion of US values.²

CHAPTER II

COVERT ACTION

The following fictional account of KGB activities in Great Britain is illustrative of Soviet intelligence goals and methods. Many of these intelligence activities are clandestine but many, including in-country propaganda and action, may be covert.

I THE KGB DIRECTIVE NO.59 TO THE LONDON STATION.

1. STRATEGIC AIMS First to destroy parliamentary democracy in Britain and replace it with a People's Socialist Democracy. Second to exploit Britain as a base of operations against other non-socialist countries throughout the world. These will include action, propaganda, and intelligence.

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5. CONCLUSION Much is working in our favor in Britain. Comrade General Zurov regards London now as possibly the most important

KGB station in the world. He believes the next twelve months will be critical in Britain. Our first objective of destroying parliamentary government and replacing it with a People's Socialist Democracy has come appreciably nearer. You have done well, Comrade Colonel, but remember, no dramatic action. Time is on our side. 1

We can interpret action and no dramatic action to mean no overt action. Covert action implies at least two things--secrecy and nonaccountability. Covert action is a term used to cover a range of activities which may be loosely related or not related at all. However, the key that separates covert action from clandestine operations (also secret) is the fact that a country participating in covert action does not, in the strongest possible terms, want to be associated with the action. This country wants either another country or entity to be blamed for the action or wishes to remain unknown for sometime.

When most people think of covert action, they think of paramilitary operations; but, covert action can be many categories of activities including terrorist acts,

propaganda, political aid, and economic aid.

Paramilitary forces are irregular armed forces operating in enemy territory. These forces may be insurgents or partisans fighting in their own country or special elements of regular forces, including military auxiliaries.

In recent decades, any country's role in covert paramilitary activities has been limited to training and advising local fighters. The techniques of paramilitary fighters include small unit tactical operations (like ambushes), demolitions, sabotage, and assassination (all US government agencies and agents are prohibited by law from planning or executing assassinations). While most acts of terror are publicly proclaimed by the perpetrators, the real planner of the act may be covert. Some countries and political entities feel that covert acts of terrorism further their policy by destabilizing their victims.

Propaganda and psychological operations (psyops) are closely related. Propaganda and psyops may be, and usually are, thought of together. Whether overt or covert, all the usually thought-of methods to influence people are in this category. These techniques include the distribution of leaflets, the planting of stories in the printed media, and the control of the radiofrequency media. Some groups have engaged in bizarre aspects of

psyops such as brainwashing and group indoctrination. The Central Intelligence Agency operated both Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty covertly in the early post-war years.

Political and economic aid can be given covertly as well as overtly. Covert aid means that the government or group who aids a candidate or party or invests in a company or government enterprise doesn't want its involvement known. The beneficiary may not know who supplies his aid; in this case, the supplier of the aid seeks to influence the behavior of the beneficiary without revealing his interest. Governments may do this when their publicly stated goals are contrary to their real goals or when the beneficiary is openly hostile.

Covert action is not necessarily the same as unconventional warfare. In fact, covert action has been in and out of the official DOD definition of unconventional warfare over the years. Currently, covert action is not part of JCS Pub 1's definition of unconventional warfare but is in the US Army's definition. The Army defines unconventional warfare as "military and paramilitary operations which include guerrilla warfare, acts of subversion, sabotage, and terrorism or other operations of low visibility and are often covert or clandestine, and which may include

military action taken against these operations." By other operations the Army means psyops. This is in fact a reasonably good definition of covert action if reworded a bit. The Army's special forces operate in these areas overtly except in special circumstances.²

These special circumstances are specified in a 1981 executive order. The Central Intelligence Agency has the charter "to conduct special activities approved by the President." This order also specifies that "No agency except the CIA (or the Armed Forces of the United States in time of war declared by Congress or during any period covered by a report to the Congress under the War Powers Resolution (87 Stat. 885)) may conduct special activities unless the President determines that another agency is more likely to achieve a particular objective." In the executive order, special activities mean those activities conducted in support of national foreign policy objectives abroad which are planned and executed so that the role of the US government is not apparent or acknowledged publicly, and functions which support these activities. The order specifies that these activities not be intended to influence the US political process, public opinion, policies, or media and do not include diplomatic activities or the collection and production of intelligence or related

support functions. Normally, US government policy requiring covert action would be carried out by the CIA. In time of limited or general war, there would be ample special activities for everyone.³

To paraphrase Von Clausewitz, war is the ultimate tool of foreign policy. However, Von Clausewitz did not think in terms of either covert action or unconventional warfare as we consider them today. If he had thought in terms of modern covert action, he probably would have concluded that many of the objectives of conventional war could be accomplished more effectively using covert action.

Covert action is a serious element of power just short of overt military action. Because of its seriousness and its paramilitary aspect, all too many decision and policy makers believe that covert action is an element of power of last resort. Covert action is only one element of the power spectrum described in Chapter I and, should the situation warrant it, should be used in concert with all other elements of power arrayed against the problem. It should not be used as a measure of last resort after all other elements of power have failed.

CHAPTER III

THE PLANNING OF COVERT ACTION

In the US, the recommendation for the use of covert action may come from many sources, such as the Department of State or the Department of Defense, but, the responsibility for incorporating covert action as a part of US policy belongs with the President as advised by the National Security Council (NSC).

The NSC has played a vital role in the formulation of foreign policy since its inception in 1947. The NSC advises the President with regard to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to national security. The NSC is the highest Executive Branch organization that reviews and provides guidance and direction for the conduct of all national foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, and covert action. 1

The Executive Branch is not alone in managing intelligence activities. The Congress plays an active role in overseeing Intelligence Community activities, including and especially, covert action. Executive Order 12333 and Public Law 96-450 mandate Congressional oversight of all intelligence activities by, at least, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the

House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

Congressional oversight is a direct result of the public investigation of alleged Intelligence Community wrong-doing in the 1970s.

Although the Congress is not a policy making organization, it is foolish to believe that the Congress does not play a role in the use of the elements of power including, and especially, covert action. All foreign intelligence activities must be reported by the President to both Congressional Intelligence Committees in a "timely manner." Public Law 96-450 does provide for exceptions to this; but, even in this case, key members of the House and the Senate must be informed of the activity. In any case, the members of the House and Senate give their advise and consent for special activities. 2

Chapter IV
FACTORS AFFECTING THE PLANNING AND EXECUTION
OF COVERT ACTION

There is a wide range of factors that affect the planning and execution of covert action. The major factors in planning covert action are foreign policy and national security policy. Covert action is serious, risky business and it must be planned in complete coordination of policy. Covert action is not a game to be played for the sake of playing the game. The risks are too high and the planner of covert action must be willing to risk failure and failure's consequences. Some of the risks involved are the embarrassment of a country's leader and its government, the weakening of alliances, the embarrassment of friendly governments, the alienation of third world countries, and the possible loss of lives in the action or in retaliation for the action. The benefits of using covert action, especially paramilitary action, must clearly outweigh the risks. All other methods of obtaining the desired policy goal must be seriously studied and rejected before covert action is planned.

For the United States, it is clear that covert action is not warranted in areas where US policy

interests are peripheral. The use of covert action must be limited to areas where the US government, its territories, ideals, or people are in clear danger. Clearly, those areas where the US has survival or vital interests at stake qualify. Not all areas where the US has a major interest may qualify; the application of covert action in these areas is subject to serious study and debate by the NSC and the elements of Congress responsible for intelligence oversight.

As indicated in the last chapter, US covert action is not planned by the Executive Branch in a vacuum. Congressional oversight can and should play a significant role in the planning and use of covert action. Congress should be involved, if for no other reason, then as part of a system of checks and balances. Congress can help assure that covert action plans are not ill-conceived and are, in fact, in accordance with US interests. They can help assure that the privilege of covert action will not be abused by the Executive Branch.

By definition, covert acts cannot be related to the executor. When the link is made between action and responsibility, especially when the link is exposed in the media, covert action is usually doomed to failure. There can be a number of modes of failure including

preemption, foreign political pressure, and economic pressure. In the US, the most likely mode of failure will be the admission by Congress that covert action has place with the withdrawal of support and funding. Leaks can occur from any source involved with the planning and execution of covert action. This fact mandates limiting the number of people and organizations who have access to the information.

Public exposure by the target of covert action is usually not as damning as leaks leading to exposure in the media. For one thing, covert action gives the planner plausible denial of the action and, as long as no substantial link is established, the planner will usually not suffer much in world opinion. The government that is the target of covert action often has low world credibility anyway.

Leadership, continuity, and coordination are required for covert action to be successful. It is intuitive that any covert action must be directed by people with strong leadership and managerial qualities. The circumstances of covert action are, at best, stressful so a premium must be placed on selecting people who operate well under heavy stress and are still able to motivate, lead, and manage people.

Continuity of leadership and policy are required for

successful covert action. The policy maker who recommends a long term action plan must do so with some assurance that the underlying policy will not change during the time period of the proposed action. Vacillating policy can be very damaging to the morale of the people asked to carry out covert action programs and can seriously damage the credibility of a country. It is also intuitive that the leadership of a covert action group should not be changed radically during the lifetime of the activity. It is likely that several agencies or entities will be involved in any government's covert activities. All parties involved in a covert action must closely coordinate their activities. The parties must approach the problem with like minds and no intra-group rivalry.

CHAPTER V
EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL
COVERT ACTION

In this chapter several examples of covert action will be examined to see why they were successful or unsuccessful.

The Libyan mining of the Red Sea is an example of both successful and unsuccessful covert action. The operation was successful because the Libyans were able to plant mines undetected and the attempts to locate and neutralize the mines used significant resources from several countries. We might say that the operation failed because it soon became apparent that the mines were not capable of seriously damaging modern cargo ships. More importantly, however, was the fact that analysis of shipping records showed that only the Libyans could have planted the mines, thus denying them plausible denial.

After World War II, Western Europe was in political upheaval and its economies were largely destroyed. President Truman ordered covert action to support the major US policy goal of that era--the containment of Communism. There are two examples of the successful use

of covert action to support this "Truman doctrine". The political and economic structure of Italy was largely in chaos except for the Communist party which was well organized. Covert aid in the form of material assistance and professional guidance were given to Italian trade unions, their press, and their political parties. This action strengthened these entities enough for them to successfully compete with the Communists. Paramilitary action was used successfully in Greece to prevent a Communist takeover. These actions were successful because US national policy was clear and unchanging during this time period. This policy was clearly stated to the organizations involved in the actions and there was close cooperation and coordination between the Department of State and the CIA, the two principle organizations involved.¹

The Soviets carried out a successful, world-wide covert operation against the US production and deployment of the "neutron bomb". The campaign resulted in President Carter dropping plans for its production. The operation was in full concert with Soviet national policy and was, almost certainly, ordered by the politburo. It is apparent that the field operatives were aware of the overall policy implications of the action and were highly motivated by Soviet decision

makers. The action plan was successful on a world-wide scale because of excellent coordination and cooperation between the parties involved. The Soviets accomplished their goal by organizing peace demonstrations in Turkey, the Republic of Germany, and the US. Front groups delivered notes to the US consulate in Germany while others sent protests to the United Nations. The Dutch Communists organized an international forum against the neutron bomb and marched 40,000 demonstrators in Amsterdam. Chairman Brezhnev wrote letters to every western government warning that the neutron bomb was a threat to detent. The Soviets even gained access to the world media, including US television.

The bombing of the Greenpeace ship, Rainbow Warrior, in New Zealand is a classic example of a covert action and is a classic example of the misapplication of the power element and the ultimate failure of the action. Greenpeace would have used the ship in its continuing, but largely ineffectual, effort to disrupt French nuclear testing in the Pacific. At best, Greenpeace is a minor irritant to the French government and it is inconceivable that the bombing of the ship could in any way enhance French foreign or security policy. The action plan was ill-conceived and may not have had the

approval of senior policy makers. The action failed because it did not deter Greenpeace (they simply bought another ship) and the action was traceable to the French. One must ask the question, who else would bomb the Rainbow Warrior? The answer, of course, is that under the circumstances no one would except the French--there could be no plausible denial. The bombing caused France considerable embarrassment and turmoil.

The Soviets engaged in covert action of a less violent nature in Egypt in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They sought to discredit the US government in the eyes of the Egyptian people and their government and to breed Egyptian dissatisfaction with President Sadat. The main tool used in this action was a series of forged US official documents. These documents were sent anonymously to the Egyptian embassy in Rome. Some were also published in the Baath Party newspaper in Syria. This operation must be considered a partial success. First, the action supported the Soviet national policy of discrediting the US in the third world. However, the forgeries were not as professional as they should have been; once released to the public, the US was able to provide proof that the documents were not official US documents. Initially many people believed the documents because the documents supported preconceived ideas about

US behavior. Even with public exposure of the forgery, some people will continue to believe the documents and many people have had the seeds of doubt planted in their minds. The danger also exists that future historians may use the documents as references without realizing that they are forgeries.³

CHAPTER VI

THE FUTURE OF COVERT ACTION

Covert action is as old as civilization and will continue to be used in the foreseeable future by those countries which have developed a capability to perform covert activities. In fact, in those societies that are closed, clandestine and covert activities are normal aspects of rule and these aspects of rule will assuredly will not change in the foreseeable future. In other countries, covert action will be used where and when necessary to support governmental policy. Covert action can be a powerful tool for pursuing national security goals because of its special character. It allows a country to project power and policy with no attribution and it can be a serious element of power just short of overt military action. Covert action can be very cost

Covert action can be very cost effective. Propaganda and even paramilitary action are relatively inexpensive when compared to other alternatives such as military intervention or economic sanctions. In a very serious situation that may result in war, all forms of covert action can be seen as a force multiplier when war comes. Any activity which

weakens the resolve of a government or the will of the people to fight is adding to the military effectiveness of the opposing military force. By its nature, covert action, even paramilitary action, does not place large numbers of nationals and nation assets at risk. Usually covert action is run by advisors using local resources for the action plan. Many countries like France will employ covert action more carefully in the future because of bad experiences. They will more fully observe the cardinal rules for covert action--consistency with national policy objectives, secrecy, and non-accountability.

There are special considerations for any future US covert actions. US policy makers must describe a rational national security policy for specific areas and this policy must be invariant if long-term covert action plans are to be used as policy tools. The action plan must have the full coordination and cooperation of all elements in the field--especially between the Department of State and the CIA. Above all, the senior management of the plan must remain the same or, if there is a transition of management, this transition must be done slowly and between individuals of like minds. Radical changes in leadership styles can be disastrous in the field.

The effects of congressional oversight cannot be minimized on the planning and execution of a covert action plan; at the least, senior members of the House of Representatives and the Senate will have knowledge of the plan and will have approval of it. Congressional oversight is both a help and a hindrance in executing covert action. Congress can, and usually does, offer foreign policy opinions that differ from Executive Branch opinions. On any serious step, such as the employment of covert action, it is prudent to have concepts validated by others with different perspectives. Congress may also be a significant roadblock to the successful completion of a long-term covert action because members of the Congress, particularly the House, are subject to the pressure of their constituents and the media.

In any plan for US covert action, the media and leaks should be considered and accounted for. Many segments of the US and world press run on sensationalism and, over the last two decades, there have been no more sensational stories than those involving covert action. The world media is particularly good at seeking out covert action. Leaks can be controlled to a degree by limiting access to covert action planning. Major

sources of leaks and the information contents of the leaks should be anticipated in planning. The goal should always be plausible denial. Without plausible denial, Congress has no alternative to terminate funding.

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